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Building a Better Marriage

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Jenny and Michael have been married for 10 years. While they love spending time with each other, the couple has become distracted from their marriage. Jenny and Michael live hectic lives; they both work, care for their children, and rarely spend time together. The couple finds themselves drifting apart and would love to build their marriage back to the strength of their early years.

Take a few minutes and reflect on your own marriage. Is it flourishing? Do you feel disconnected? Has your life become so busy that your relationship has hit the back burner? Maybe you and your spouse are struggling due to unfulfilled expectations? If you have been struggling with your marital relationship, or if you would like to improve the quality of your relationship, you are not alone. Just as Jenny and Michael want to strengthen their marriage, you can too! Research has provided evidence of key characteristics that help build better marriages. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide some principles that are key to strengthening marriages through friendship, empathy, mutual love and respect, daily acts of kindness, and creating family traditions.

Friendship

Friendship is one of the most important characteristics of strong marriages. If partners start their marriage with a weak friendship, they may find difficulty in remaining close over time. Couples who don't see themselves as great friends

may be less polite to each other, or they could lose respect for one another. Overall, couples who have been friends throughout their marriages have been happier and more satisfied with their marriages (Clark & Leigh, 2000). Here are some ways to work on your friendship with your spouse:

- Make time for each other. Making time to be with your spouse will help keep the relationship alive. It will help both of you to connect and reconnect often. Schedule time each week specifically for quality time. This could include going on a date, talking, leisure time, or anything the two of you enjoy doing together.
- Laugh often and create memories. Sharing enjoyable times with each other will prevent boredom from creeping into your relationship. It can also help you feel refreshed when life seems hard or hectic. Mark Twain is quoted as saying, "Humor is mankind's greatest blessing." (Powers, 2010). Humor can lighten the mood when conflicts arise, give comfort during trials, and create fondness for one another (Kift, 2013). This is a way to keep the relationship joyful and exciting.
- Engage in friendship behaviors. Just because a couple moves from dating one day to being married the next, does not mean they should stop working on their friendship. Friendship behaviors include: talking about each other's day, going for a walk, playing a game, listening to music, dancing, working

on a project together, saying “thank you” to simple acts, and so on (Clark & Leigh, 2000). Continuing these actions after marriage will help to strengthen friendship and marriage.

Empathy

When you exercise empathy in your relationship, you and your partner will be on the same page (Carter & Newby, 2010). True empathy is putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. Researchers have shown that empathy is more important in a relationship than satisfaction. Partners are more content with their relationships if they know their spouse understands what they are feeling and expresses empathy toward them (Clark & Leigh, 2000).

- Understand your partner and their emotions/actions. What is your spouse feeling? Why are they feeling that way? How would you feel if you were in that situation? These are all questions you could ask yourself to show empathy in your relationship.
- Show care and concern for your partner. When your partner expresses their self to you, it is important to help them feel validated (Carter & Newby, 2010). Validating your partner allows them to feel your empathy for them.
- Take time to listen. When your partner comes to you with conflict, or just needs to talk, it is important to take time to listen. Focus on your partner and how they are feeling rather than what your reply will be, solving the problem, or any other number of things that could be running through your mind. Reflecting what you hear your partner is saying can clarify whether you truly see things from your partner’s perspective. Re-examining the situation and trying to see it from your partner’s angle will help you use empathy.

Mutual Love and Respect

Marriage is built on love and respect. Two people who fall in love and get married are bound to have had love and respect for each other at one point or another in their relationship. Continuing to let your partner know how much you love and respect them will build your marriage. Here are some ideas:

- Be accepting of your partner. When people feel their spouses accept them for who they are, they are more confident and secure in their relationships. Often, couples engage in conflict because they can’t accept the differences between them. Research has shown spouses who accept their differences and love each other unconditionally, are more likely to change (Clark & Leigh, 2000). Be positive and accepting to your partner and receive positivity in return. Acceptance is vital to a happy marriage.
- Turn toward each other instead of away. John Gottman, psychologist and relationship specialist, has found this strategy to be one of the most helpful in relationships. When in conflict, turn toward your partner to discuss the problem instead of turning away (Gottman & Gottman, 2016). This can mean physically turning toward your partner when they are talking or even responding positively when they share good news or with empathy if difficult news is shared. Turning toward your partner lets them know you truly care.
- Be committed to the relationship. Showing commitment to your partner and the relationship will help keep the relationship strong when struggles arrive. Couples who are committed in their relationships are more willing to make sacrifices for the good of the relationship and they are happier in the long run (Clark & Leigh, 2000).

Daily Acts of Kindness

Performing daily acts of kindness for your spouse has many benefits. Daily acts of kindness increase appreciation, friendship, and love for each other. They help couples keep their small annoyances from being blown out of proportion. Some research suggests that acts of kindness may even promote romance in the marriage (Clark & Leigh, 2000). Some ideas of how to weave daily acts of kindness into your relationship include:

- Writing your partner a love note regarding what you love and appreciate about them
- Help each other with a project

- Make their favorite meal
- Do your partner's least favorite chore
- Hold the door open for your partner

Create Couple Rituals and Traditions

Creating couple rituals and traditions is a wonderful way to build a strong marriage. Rituals and traditions give couples meaning and predictability. Rituals can help couples recharge from their everyday stresses and increase intimacy in their relationship (Clark & Leigh, 2000). There are many ways to incorporate traditions and rituals into your relationship. Some ideas include:

- Having a talk with your spouse at the end of each day to discuss what happened in the day
- Have a weekly date night – no talking about work, children or money!
- Kiss each other when you depart in the morning and return home each day
- Create special traditions to do on holidays, such as anniversaries and Valentine's day

Keeping marriages strong takes time and effort. The tips in this fact sheet, when implemented, can help strengthen your relationship. Take the first step by talking with your spouse about these tips and apply

them in your life! Friendship, empathy, mutual love and respect, daily acts of kindness, and creating couple rituals and traditions will help you have a strong and happy marriage.

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